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Alternative Scheduling. ERIC Digest.

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Alternative scheduling provides community colleges with a means of adapting to declining enrollments, fiscal exigencies, and the demand for accountability to students. Strategies such as departing from traditional semester- or quarter-length courses and developing weekend programs have been implemented at certain institutions to attract new segments of the population to college attendance. Other options, such as lengthening class periods or shortening the school week, have been pursued to reduce instructional costs for students and/or the institution.

This digest reviews a sample of current alternative scheduling practices and their outcomes.

ALTERNATIVE SEMESTER LENGTHS

While in the process of considering or implementing calendar changes, several colleges conducted studies of the relative effectiveness of various academic calendars for promoting student progress, faculty success, staff performance, and cost-effectiveness. Many colleges resisted calendar changes, finding them administratively impractical, opposed by faculty or students, or disruptive to students' summer employment needs. Others replaced their existing academic calendars in favor of semester, trimester, early start of quarter systems.

The Coast Community College District, rather than offering all courses under any one academic calendar, currently offers selected courses on four alternative schedules:

- o The regular 18-week semester which begins in mid-August and finishes prior to the winter holidays.
- o A 15-week semester, which begins three weeks after and ends at the same time as the 18-week term. The courses offered under this schedule meet for 30 minutes more each week than their 18-week counterparts.
- o A nine-week semester in which classes meet for six rather than three hours per week.
- o A nine-week semester which covers half of the content and earns half of the course credit of the normal semester which awards three units per course.

Though the nine- and 15-week schedule were designed to serve and attract non-traditional students, the findings of studies (Crow, 1984a and 1984b) conducted to develop a profile of the characteristics and objectives of the students who chose the alternative options revealed:

- o 54% of the students on the 15-week schedule were between 18 and 21 years of age, while 40% were over 21. In the 9-week

classes, 44% were between 18 and 21, and 52% were over 21.

- o The 15-week course in particular was designed with mothers of school-age children in mind. However, over 80% of the students selecting one of the alternative options had no dependents.

- o Over 50% of the students enrolled in one of the alternative schedules were also enrolled in courses offered on the traditional 18-week term.

- o A significant proportion of the students (36% of those on the 15-week schedule and 31% of those on one of the nine-week schedules) indicated that they would not be attending Orange Coast College had these class schedules not been available.

WEEKEND COLLEGES

Since the early 1970's, various two-year colleges have offered weekend courses. Pikes Peak Community College initiated its "weekend college" in 1981 as part of its continuing education program (Kline, 1984). Faculty and administrators at the college identified five major advantages to a weekend schedule:

- o Classes are held in existing facilities that are fully

scheduled during the regular week, so that the only

additional cost is a minimal outlay for janitorial service and utilities.

- o The weekend classes do not take students from weekday classes, but instead add additional students to the total enrollment.

- o For students who are enrolled in regular weekly classes, the weekend college provides an alternative schedule for completing required courses.
- o The weekend program allows for flexibility in scheduling full-and part-time instructors.
- o Necessary auxiliary instructional materials and audio-visual equipment are readily available.

In 1976, when William Rainey Harper College investigated the effects of weekend scheduling on students' academic achievement, they found that weekend students tended to have higher withdrawal rates than weekday or evening students, but that they rated their courses as more beneficial and earned higher grades. Many indicated that they would have rather taken the courses at other times, and most felt that additional campus services should be available to them on the weekends (Lucas, 1976).

Milwaukee Area Technical College's "1986 Student Survey Report" highlighted the distinguishing characteristics of their weekend college students (Redovich, 1986). The study revealed that students taking courses on weekends were, in comparison to day or evening students:

- o older (an average of 32.6 years compared to 30.5 years for evening students and 25.1 years for day students)
- o more likely to have dependent children and be interested in child care services
- o less likely to be minority group members
- o less likely to receive financial aid

LENGTHENING CLASS PERIODS

In an effort to conserve energy and reduce student travel to campus, Harford Community College substituted 75-minute classes twice a week and 150-minute classes once a week for regular 50-minute classes meeting three times a week. A survey of faculty and student reactions to the change revealed that: (1) the average credit load fell only 1%; (2) the mean number of student trips per week to campus

decreased from 3.79 to 3.42; (3) both faculty and students preferred 75-minute classes to 150-minute classes; (4) 51% of the students preferred the new schedule to the old; and (5) the majority of the students felt that their work schedule, free time, and extracurricular activities were unaffected or enhanced by the new schedule.

FOUR-DAY WEEKS

While some colleges are implementing weekend courses to attract new students, colleges in many parts of the country have shifted to shortened work weeks to reduce cost. Both Oklahoma City Community College (Shirazi, 1983) and the College of DuPage (Wallace, 1981) implemented four-day instructional weeks during summer sessions with positive outcomes, including:

- o a significant reduction in electrical usage.

- o savings from reduced building maintenance in excess of

\$23,000 at the College of DuPage.

- o cost savings resulting from a reduction in miles

driven by students and staff

- o positive reaction from students. At Oklahoma City

Community College 25% of the students indicated

that their academic performance, study time, and commuting

time had been affected for the better. At the College of

DuPage, 72% of the students preferred the four-day schedule. Variations in the academic calendar are not the only way of enhancing productivity, but they can be effective. They attract new students and increase space utilization, all at practically no cost. College planners who seek ways of maintaining enrollments should consider the implementation of various approaches to program scheduling.

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